

"I don't think I'd ever on my best day be able to follow his damned lead on that." Ruth poured a dollup of milk into her coffee and added a little packet of artificial sweetener, and replied, "It did look a little on the vigorous side, Nita, but I was you, I'd give it a try; you don't, he might just go out and find himself a young chicken that will." Juanita rubbed an aching knee and said, "Well, I don't know...."

And out in the pool, Clete pushed off the bottom, kicking his trousers and underwear off his legs as he rose toward the surface.

THE LAWN KING

Clete has gotten involved with his lawn. It started out as therapy, using the lawn mower as a sort of roaring walker on wheels during the later stages of his recovery from the stroke. As his recovery progressed, the therapy was transformed into an obsession. Three shelves in his garage are now crammed with boxes and bottles and bags of various lawn care products — fertilizers and insecticides and weed control agents. He owns a two-gallon pump-action spray bottle, a red Twirl-O-Feeder that spews white nitrogen nuggets in a wide, even pattern. He has a nine-horse-power Mega-Mower that can — if its operator is swift enough or his prey slow or stupid enough — puree a cat or a small dog in two seconds flat, then shoot the molecular feline or canine bits into the grass catcher to moisten the otherwise powdery mulch. He has a turbo-powered Weed Wacker that can reduce a redwood fence to kindling, or gouge out a trench in the dirt deep enough for sprinkler pipe. Clete's obsession has paid off. His lawn glows with green health, and he has started, with his chiding of his less-green-thumbish neighbors, a good-natured competition to see who can maintain the most perfect front lawn.

Ellis Leahy, next door, suffers dandelions. He and his wife Ruth were out one Saturday with the weed pluckers pulling them up one by one (the only way to really get rid of them according to Clete) when Chuck wandered down from up the street and asked Ellis to come on up for a beer if he had the time, and to "... take a look at my damned lawn. I don't know what the hell is wrong with it; it just seems to be crumbling apart on me." Ellis stood up and brushed his knees off and said, "A beer sounds good, Chuck, but you want advice about your lawn, I suggest you go an' ask old Clete. He's the neighborhood expert." Chuck gazed over at the putting green that was Clete's lawn and said, "Yeah, I know, but he's gettin' to be such an asshole — pardon my French, Ruth — when it comes to this lawn shit." Ellis glanced

over at Clete's house and said, "Yeah, I know what you mean. The guy got a little head start on the rest of us on this project an' now he thinks he's the lawn king or something." Chuck nodded his head and said, "He can be a real arrogant bastard sometimes." "I know, Chuck, I know." "He told me," Chuck whined, "that they got crabgrass growin' wild in the canyon behind the wrecking yard that looks better'n my front lawn." Ellis smiled sympathetically and said, "Ah, he's just kiddin' around with you, Chuck. Don't take it so seriously."

Chuck's wife Nadine came out of the house with two tall Budweisers for Chuck and Ellis and the three of them stood on the sidewalk and looked at Chuck's poor suffering lawn, a withered patch of greyish-green bermuda. There were bare-dirt holes the size of dinner plates in the lawn's center, and smaller dry-brown patches emanating outward toward the edges. "Whatever the hell it is," said Ellis, "it's spreadin'." He pointed to the lawn's center and let his finger follow the path of destruction.

Down the street Clete was out hand-watering some incipient dry spots on his lawn when he saw the powwow up at Chuck's place. He saw Ellis shaking his head, pointing at Chuck's lawn making motions of commiseration. "Looks like they need," Clete said as he turned off his water, "the services of the Lawn King."

They did need a lawn king, but they really needed one that was a bit more of a diplomat than Clete was. Clete sauntered up, pointed to the afflicted lawn, chuckled and said, "You dumb shit, Chuck, you got fuckin' lawn moths." Chuck drained his beer and tossed the empty onto the miserable front lawn and said, "Is that so? Well me an' Ellis just decided it's probably some sort of fungus." Nadine, who had slipped into the house when she saw Clete coming, returned with a beer for him. Clete popped it open and took a long pull off it and squinted at Chuck and said, "No offense, neighbor, but you an' Ellis wouldn't know a fungus it oozed up and bit you on the balls." He laughed at his turn of phrase, then he said to Chuck, "If I had your level of lawn maintenance skill, I'd rototil this motherfucker up and put in rock."

Nadine screamed when Chuck connected with the punch, then she danced out of the way as the two men clinched and wrestled each other to the ground. Ellis reached out and grabbed her arm and pulled her out of harm's way, and then he said to the two combatants, "All right, you two, knock it off, will ya?" Then Nadine clutched her hand over her mouth and said, "Oh my God, what are those?" They were moths, thousands of them, getting scared up out of the lawn by the rolling and tumbling Clete and Chuck.